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1997
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January 31,

PSC SCHEDULES US WEST/AT&T ARBITRATION HEARING TO BEGIN FEB. 4

On Tuesday, Montanans move one step closer to the reality of local telephone competition when the Public Service Commission begins a hearing to set terms and conditions for AT&T's return to local telephone service in Montana. The commission decision, which must be made by March 20, will be a major step towards competition in local telephone service. The hearing will begin Tuesday, February 4, at 9 a.m., in the PSC's Bollinger Room, 1701 Prospect Avenue. AT&T and US West Communications have asked the PSC to arbitrate certain interconnection issues which they have been unable to resolve. The hearing, at which AT&T and US West will present testimony, is expected to last about ten days. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 significantly changed the communication industry. Local phone companies, previously protected from competition, now must open their markets to other phone companies. They are required to negotiate agreements with telephone companies to establish wholesale telecommunication prices. If parties are unable to resolve pricing issues, they may petition the PSC to arbitrate. US West and AT&T have filed such an arbitration petition with the commission. A listing of the many, specific and complex technical issues identified for arbitration is available from the PSC. The vision for telephone competition enables companies such as AT&T to purchase bulk services from existing local carriers such as US WEST, rather than building new telephone systems. The PSC's decision will determine the price AT&T pays US WEST for telecommunication. The decision in this case sets the stage for consumer choice for local telephone service.

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